

State Legislature Votes to Approve Student Success Act

Vernonia Teachers Hold Brief Walkout in Support of Education Funding

By Scott Laird

Vernonia School District teachers and some staff took part in a statewide walkout on Wednesday, May 8 in the hopes of sending a message to legislators in Salem that Oregon needs to provide adequate funding for education through passage of the Student Success Act (HB 3427).

Oregon legislators seem to have heard the message, and on Monday, May 13, the Oregon Senate voted to approve the bill 18-11, a 2/3 majority which assured it will become law.

The bill was not approved without a fight. HB 3427 was passed by the State House and was awaiting action by the State Senate on the day of the statewide walkout by teachers. Senate Republicans were insisting that the legislature find a solution to funding for the state Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) debt, if they allowed a vote on school funding.

Oregon Democratic Senator Betsy Johnson from Scappoose shared Republicans' views on addressing the PERS issue. "This was a very, very difficult bill for me to support, because, while I am very supportive of additional funding for education, I'm also extremely cognizant of the fact that unless the State does something about PERS, much of this new money could be diverted to our unfunded liability in PERS," said Senator Johnson in a telephone interview with *Vernonia's Voice* on the day following the Senate's historic vote.

"We are standing in solidarity with the tens of thousands of educators, public-school families, and supporters today," said Juliet Safier, president of the Vernonia Education Association, in a brief statement during the Vernonia teacher walkout on May 8.

"We are sending a message to Salem. They need to fully fund education."

"Education has been in a decades long crisis," said Safier. "Our urban schools have some of the largest class sizes in the nation. Districts all over the state have cut music and art programs. Oregon



has the third lowest graduation rate in the nation. Oregon students deserve better."

HB 3427 establishes a Fund for Student Success and specifies uses of the fund. The program would be funded through a tax on corporations operating in Oregon by taxing businesses at a rate of 0.57% on their sales above \$1 million a year. Businesses could subtract 35% of their labor or capital costs from their total sales before calculating the tax. According to the bill, Oregonians in the bottom three tax brackets will qualify for a slight tax break to offset any possible rise in the cost of goods or services. State economists estimate the corporate tax could generate \$2 billion every two years for education. The state's largest business lobbying organization, Oregon Business & Industry, has taken a neutral stance on the bill.

While many teachers across the state did not go to work on May 8 as part of the statewide action, choosing to take part in rallies in Salem and Portland and forcing School Districts to cancel classes for the day, Vernonia teachers took a different approach. Vernonia teachers and staff held a 15 minute

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Bids for Classroom Expansion Too High

Vernonia School District Superintendent Aaron Miller had some bad news for the Vernonia School Board at their May 9 meeting.

Miller told the Board that the bids for the construction of a four classroom addition to the school campus were much higher than the District had budgeted for the project.

The classroom expansion is part of the ambitious list of projects the District had planned to accomplish with funding generated from a tax bond approved by voters in 2017.

Miller says the District had \$1.8 million to spend on the project, based on estimates they had received prior to the bond campaign. He said eight construction companies participated in a pre-bid qualifying process, but only two companies submitted actual bids. He said the two bids the District received were for \$2.5 million and \$3 million.

"At this point I am not confident we can complete this project as designed," said Miller "We need to go back to the drawing board as far as the remaining funds and the remaining projects we still have on the list that we intended to accomplish with the bond money."

The Bond passed in 2017 was for \$6.8 million. The District used \$4.5 million of that to pay of debt from the original campus construction that was crippling their annual operational budget. The State of Oregon matched the remainder of the community's \$2.3 million through a special program. With that \$4.6 million, the District has built a new football field and track and field facility on their campus, made needed repairs at the Mist School, are getting ready to construct a new welding shop, and planned to construct the four classroom addition.

"I'm really disappointed, but we were working with estimated figures from several years ago, and we were trying to work in a really tight construction market," said Miller.

Miller said the welding shop will also cost more than was originally estimated, but will be completed for the start of the next school year. "It's a critical element for our Career and Technical Education (CTE) program and preparing our kids for their futures," said Miller.

Miller told the Board he has some ideas about how the District should move forward with the remaining bond funds and proposed projects. The Board has scheduled a workshop on May 30 to discuss those options with Miller. Miller said he would also like to include the community in the conversations about the Bond funding in some way.

Vernonia Hosts Home Track Meet

The Vernonia School District hosted a home track and field meet for the first time in several decades. Teams from Special District 1, along with a few others took part in the event on May 2. The District completed construction of the new facility last year, which includes long jump and triple jump pits, room for high jump and pole vault, and space for javelin, shot put, and discus throwing events.

"The weather was perfect with the temps in the mid 60s, and the event was well attended," said Vernonia head coach John Rody. "We received several compliments on how well the field looked and how the meet was run. A big thank you to all of the volunteers who helped make it successful. I believe everyone had a great time, and we hope to do even better next year!"

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